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# An Abstract Alphabet

A painter crafts her own formal language

BY HUNTER BRAITHWAITE



HAYAL POZANTI'S PAINTINGS are Rorschach tests for the 4chan generation—fluorescently colored gyres of abstraction, churning on innumerable axes, by turns simple and complex. Stillborn corporate emblems come to mind, as do puzzles and keyholes. “I think a lot about microchips, where information is stored physically within a computer,” says the artist, whose first museum exhibition opens at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, this month. There’s something in the structure and deployment of these shapes that draws a taut cord between the digital and the physical, and between access and encryption.

Born in Istanbul in 1983, Pozanti studied visual arts and visual communication design at the city’s Sabancı University. After graduating, she landed a job creating window displays and visual branding for an upscale department store; it was there that she gained an understanding for corporate curves and the logic of logos. When offered a promotion, she turned it down, heading instead to Yale University for her MFA in painting, where she studied under Peter Halley. The Neo-Geo painter instilled in her a canny understanding of how color—especially when conceived as a system—can express ideas, and, perhaps unexpectedly, how surveillance influences human psychology.

At this point, Pozanti was trawling message boards and manga sites for lurid images to decontextualize and then work into painterly compositions. “I was fascinated with the most gruesome things I could find out there. It felt so interesting to me that I had access to all this information without censorship,” she says. These pictures made their way into her painting as unrecognizable traces, but the constant sedimentation of countless seen images began to take its toll. After storing nearly a million files—“I was a hoarder,” she says nonchalantly—Pozanti came to realize that, in our attention economy, appropriation leads to deflation. So she tried something new: “What seemed most logical was to completely forget everything I had seen and start from scratch, and the best way to do that was to come up with abstract shapes.”



“I want viewers to be surrounded by these glyphs, so they start seeing patterns and identifying repetition.”

She pared down her formal lexicon into a series of 31 such shapes that could be deployed in strictly formal, or linguistic, compositions. Their squirming presence is equal parts biological and geometric, something between Allan McCollum and a smartphone app icon. Although the rules of the paintings change from series to series, nearly all include one or more of these shapes, overlaid, and then colored with acrylic paint. Though inspired by the Internet, Pozanti stresses the physicality of the paintings. Her colors range from fluorescent to chalky earth tones, and her forms—while they would, at first glance, be perfectly at home on your computer’s desktop—have an earnest impasto to them, rife with chunky over-painting, rivulets of brushstrokes, and the errant streak of preparatory charcoal.

While painting, she takes digital photos of the in-progress pieces, akin to artists of a previous generation, who used a mirror or a Polaroid camera to distance themselves from the inchoate work. This doesn’t just get at something that recurs in her practice—“the simultaneous superimposition of real and virtual,” as she puts it—it is a color corrective for how the works will likely be viewed: Images appear cooler on-screen than elsewhere, the artist points out, simply because blue pixels use less energy.

Pozanti’s shapes lend themselves to different media. The artist has created GIFs and videos from them, as well as sculptures; in addition, she’s exploring linguistics, assigning phonemes to the shapes, and a recent sound piece has her “reading” an animated series of forms.



Pozanti has also turned her personal alphabet into a font, which can easily be distributed and used as a kind of encryption system. This last application not only dovetails neatly with current privacy issues, but with the artist’s upbringing, including what she calls the “constant government censorship” of the previous decade in Turkey.

For her show at the Aldrich, Pozanti is connecting the contemporary moment to a much older system of writing and images. A series of new paintings will be self-consciously “hieroglyphic,” and horizontally oriented. “I want viewers to be surrounded by these glyphs, so they start seeing patterns and identifying repetition,” she explains. With the development of writing, Pozanti points out, humans experienced a cognitive shift from the right brain to the left, but with the ascent of the image-dominated Internet, we’re starting to see a reversal. Maybe pictographs are the unexpected future. **MP**

ABOVE:  
*46* (Source material: Percentage increase in requests by world governments for Twitter user data since the beginning of 2014.), 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

LEFT:  
Hayal Pozanti, 2015.

OPPOSITE:  
Installation view of “Ciphers,” her show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco earlier this year.